

**AN AUDIOVISUAL EXPLORATION OF  
A SEASIDE GUESTHOUSE  
AND THE PERSONAL AND COLLECTIVE  
MEMORIES OF  
ITS LONG-TERM RESIDENTS**

**DANIELLE SWINDELLS  
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As this is a practice-led research project, there is a visual submission of a short film, which must be watched before the reading of the thesis. This can be viewed on the DVD provided or accessed online via:

<https://vimeo.com/184693621>

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## ABSTRACT

In this research project I set out to understand how the film medium can be used to materialize the physical and symbolic change of Blackpool's seaside landscape through the internal location of The Ashleigh Hotel. The building functioned as a seaside guesthouse until approximately thirty years ago when it stopped accommodating tourists and became privately tenanted accommodation for benefit claimants. This is symptomatic of a wider transformation undergone by Blackpool, a traditional seaside resort in the North of England, as the advent of cheap air travel in the 1970's caused the "bucket and spade" holiday to fall from popularity. Subsequent economic problems have resulted in low property prices and a rise in the number of guesthouses no longer servicing holidaymakers but instead housing Blackpool's enormous transient population of people facing difficulties such as such as drug addiction and unemployment.

My study explores how a declining landscape maintained on nostalgia can affect the human condition of those inhabiting it. I filmed inside the building three times a week for approximately five weeks and used a HD camcorder with observational and participatory documentary methodologies (Nichols, 2010) forming the basis of the filming process. This was done alongside an artist's approach to aesthetics. I developed a method through the making of the film, which juxtaposed the residents' personal histories of the town and outside world with the internal domestic architecture of the building. A series of contrasts began to emerge during the filming process: Then and Now, Closeness and Distance, Isolation and Community, Internal and External, which became central to the research project and informed my practice. The film is called *Over And Over* and is submitted as part of my thesis.



## INTRODUCTION

As part of this practice-led research, I have made a twenty-minute documentary that I filmed over a period of five weeks. This is an expansion of my preliminary study and filmmaking practice at BA (Hons) degree level which involved the production of a twelve-minute documentary on Blackpool and the influence of the “bucket and spade” holiday’s fall from popularity in the town. This was explored through two locations, Haworth’s Bingo Hall and The Ashleigh Hotel. It was the discovery of the latter during production, now an eighteen-bedroom HMO (houses in multiple occupation) and its residents that showed the potential for an autonomous subject that encompassed all of the town’s themes, necessitating an in-depth study and documentation. An HMO is defined as: “A licensed property of at least three storeys height rented out by at least 3 people who are not from one “household” (eg. a family) but share facilities like the bathroom and kitchen” (GOV, 2006).

I first came across The Ashleigh Hotel in March 2015. I was given the name and phone number of the building’s owner by Blackpool Council following an interview I had with its leader, Simon Blackburn. I had approached them for an interview and introduction to the town’s current situation after reading many articles branding the seaside resort a “dumping ground” for the socially excluded.

I had never been to Blackpool before and my meeting with Simon left a significant impression on me. He explained that he too had turned up to the town over a decade ago after a toxic break up with nothing more than a duffle bag of clothes and his total savings of £150. He stressed that like him, people usually settle in Blackpool after something goes wrong in their life, as a last resort. I began romanticising this image, forming an idea of outsiders starting life again amongst the ghosts of family holidays and fond memories gone by. I couldn’t help but notice my indulgence of sentimentality for a place I had no personal connection to. I began to understand that it was this similar romanticising and central theme of memory that was attracting those migrating to Blackpool. I wanted to meet some of these people, see how they lived there and hear their stories.

I am particularly concerned with landscapes and sites in decline that suggest a utopic hope for the future and are pervaded by a melancholic sense of memory and nostalgia. Why are these themes so prevalent in the British seaside resort? Although they also function through other means, memory and nostalgia inform an important part of these places and I am interested in the effect this has on those who dwell there. As I will go on to explain in the first chapter of my dissertation, The Ashleigh Hotel is symptomatic of a wider transformation undergone by Blackpool and it is this specificity and suggestiveness of one location that is often a starting point for my work.

This project influenced me to work independently for the first time in my practice. I made this decision to generate intimacy and reduce any potential intimidation felt by subjects. In addition to this, I used "observational" and "participatory" (Nichols, 2010) methodologies to elicit insightful responses from subjects as well as a sensory approach to aesthetics to explore the affective fabric of human existence. As I will show later in my dissertation, interview technique and visual style will both be explored as I seek to understand how the film medium can be used to evoke a sense of history and memory and to materialise the physical and symbolic change of Blackpool's seaside landscape.

I believe my research area is of particular relevance now more than ever in the wake of the United Kingdom's EU referendum. The British seaside is a salient representation of British culture (Gammon and Jarratt, 2016) and Blackpool, arguably it's most well-known coastal town had an overwhelming 67.5% Leave majority vote. This made it 'the most Euro-sceptic place in the North-West of England' (Pidd, 2016). I think this reaction from a considerable amount of the town's population can be seen as a staunch defense of national identity which I find striking and this has further motivated me to explore it's place identity and history.

This thesis consists of three chapters: Place, Practice and Learning. I felt that it was important to first set up a notion of place as this research project is site specific and

as I am a filmmaker, to then foreground the way in which I worked there as a practitioner. With theory and practice understood and implemented, I wanted to then take stock in the final chapter by examining how my research aims were realised.

In the first chapter I will examine the site of my research: one dwelling and the wider town in which it is situated. I will begin by defining my understanding of place and focus on Yi-Fu Tuan's Humanistic Geography thinking. I will go on to explain the history of The Ashleigh Hotel and its change in function from a seaside hotel to HMO. I will relate The Ashleigh Hotel's transformation to the wider site of Blackpool, using The Centre for Social Justice's *Turning The Tide* (CSJ, 2013) report on problems faced by seaside towns since their economic downfall. To understand the site's residents' migration to the town, I will look at "seasideness" (Jarratt, 2015) to deepen my understanding of sense of place specifically felt in a seaside resort. I will describe the structure of The Ashleigh Hotel and interrogate the way in which residents dwell there, opening up the domestic space to symbolic readings.

In the second chapter I will describe the filmmaking methodology used to materialise the physical and symbolic change of Blackpool's seaside landscape through the place of The Ashleigh Hotel. I will identify and explore central ethical issues facing documentary filmmakers, going on to explain how I conducted my own research project with these in mind. I will describe how my interview technique and hybridity of participatory and observational documentary filmmaking methodologies (Nichols, 2010) allowed me to extract personal narratives and gain an insight into the human condition. I will reference Marc Isaac's *Lift* (2001) and Harvard University's Sensory Ethnography Lab's *Manakamana* (2013) as two films that also use strict spatial restrictions to contextualise my own practice. In addition to this, I will consider my visualisation of The Ashleigh Hotel and external world noting Edward Hopper's influence on my distinct framing approach along with Chantal Akerman's *Hotel Monterey* (1972) and Gideon Koppel's *Sleep Furiously* (2008).

In the third chapter I will analyse the way in which I worked during my research project and demonstrate how my research aims have been met. I have presented this section in a series of tensions that together cover all thematic aspects of the study.

## CHAPTER ONE - PLACE

Family trips to the seaside are a common childhood experience embedded in the psyche of the British working class. I am the daughter of two British working class parents, however, I grew up in Kuwait from the age of four until twelve. Most of my early memories of summer holidays with my Mum and Dad are foregrounded abroad. As my early formative years were spent in The Middle East, I sometimes find it difficult to relate to collective memory and shared experiences of friends who grew up in the UK. In this sense, I sometimes feel like an outsider despite being a British national and have almost lived in the UK as long as I did in Kuwait. I believe this outsider perspective provides me with a unique sense of newness and excitement at elements of British culture such as the traditional seaside resort.

This curiosity led me to Blackpool and although in a state of serious economic decline and blighted by social problems, I was amazed to find the town still attracts a significant transient population who migrate there. I'm intrigued by the landscape's symbolism and magnetism and it is in this spirit of curiosity that I will attempt to understand my site of research, through the connected themes of place, memory and nostalgia. In this chapter, I will begin by defining 'place' and more specifically "seasideness" (Jarratt, 2015) and then go on to introduce the site of The Ashleigh Hotel and the seaside resort of Blackpool. I believe that the dwelling of The Ashleigh Hotel can be seen as a microcosmic rendition of a wider transformation undergone by Blackpool's seaside landscape. I have investigated the functions of the internal and external and explored their similarities, identifying who is drawn to these places and what they are motivated by. The film I made as part of this practice-led research is entirely set inside a private property and therefore I will discuss the work of other filmmakers who exercise space-based approaches. I will also discuss the work of other filmmakers who approach film through the framing of domestic architecture and discuss the differences and similarities between their practice and my own. I believe studying the way residents inhabit The Ashleigh Hotel has helped me understand their relationship with place and how dwelling in a landscape maintained on nostalgia can affect the human condition.

## DEFINING PLACE

It is important for me to gain a legitimate understanding of place because I believe it will influence the way I view my research site. According to Tim Cresswell, place "is not only something to be observed, researched and written about, but is itself part of the way we see, research and write" (Cresswell, 2004:15). A basic way to consider place is space that people have made meaningful (Cresswell, 2004). Yi-Fu Tuan specifies this statement, explaining that "what begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with meaning" (Tuan, 1977:6). Cresswell explains that this is done through everyday practices, "the repetition of seemingly mundane activities on a daily basis" (Cresswell, 2004:82). We make place ours by carrying out "place-making activities" and asserting our identity on a place that already has a history. As my research project is the dwelling place of fourteen people, the creation of place in my research project can be seen in the rhythm of their everyday lives cohabiting under one roof.

Rather than the non-theoretical use of place, my study will explore how place can affect the human condition of those inhabiting it and this aligns with Human Geography thinkers who saw place as a way of "being-in-the-world". Yi-Fu Tuan coined the word "topophilia" which he used to refer to the 'affective bond between people and place'. (Tuan, 1974: 4). By looking at the connections and attachments between people and place, I believe we can become more aware of worlds of meaning and experience. Rather than the world of cold, hard logic of spatial science, humanist geography emphasises a rich interplay of people and the environment (Cresswell, 2004: 11) and it is this allowance for the richness of human experience that makes it useful to me as a documentary filmmaker and artist.

Returning to this idea of attachments and connections, I find myself linking place to history and memory. Philosopher Edward Casey supports this notion: "It is the stabilising persistence of place as a container of experiences that contributes so powerfully to its intrinsic memorability [...] We might even say that memory is naturally place-orientated or at least place-supported"(Casey, 1987:186). The subjects of my research project have personal memories and experiences of

Blackpool however, there is also a significant “social memory” attached to the town. Cresswell explains that “one of the primary ways in which memories are constituted is through production of places” and includes the preservation of buildings and heritage zones as an example of this (Cresswell, 2004). This rings true to Blackpool, a place of British historical and cultural significance. I believe nostalgia is an important element in the town, supported by key features such as Blackpool Tower Ballroom, the Winter Gardens and the three coastal piers. These are all Grade I & Grade II listed buildings built in the 1800’s that are used for entertainment purposes that play on sentimentality for a bygone era to appeal to visitors. I believe this is what Casey means by “place-memory” – “the ability of place to make the past come to life in the present and thus contribute to the production and reproduction of social memory” (Cresswell, 2004: 87). Place and memory can be seen as intrinsically linked.

## **BLACKPOOL**

I will first describe the transformation undergone by Blackpool so that I can provide my specific site of research, The Ashleigh Hotel, with a historical context and meaning. Both have experienced a shift in purpose and clientele. A main aim of my research project is to use the film medium to materialise the physical and symbolic change of Blackpool’s seaside landscape and if I am to do this I must identify what it has entailed.

Blackpool Tower, inspired by Paris’ more illustrious Eiffel Tower, was completed in 1894 as the town’s acclaim grew as a seaside resort for the industrial workers of Lancashire and grew in popularity nationwide (reaching Northern Ireland, Industrial Scotland and Wales) by the interwar years. It was considered, in a tempting and not entirely misleading phrase, “the Mecca of the English working class” (Walton, 1994: 1). By the mid 1930’s, 7 million visitors passed through the town (Walton 1994: 120) that generally stayed for a week during the summer months. However, its economy was badly affected by the advent of cheaper foreign travel in the 1970’s causing a decreased demand for traditional “bucket and spade” holidays. A visitor survey in 1972 calculated that about 6 million visitors ventured to the town but 80 percent of the visits were for single days or evening only. Fifteen years later a second survey

calculated 3.46 million visitors including those who merely drove along the promenade to see the Illuminations. (Walton, 1994: 6)

In tandem with the town's economic decline as the tourism receded, Blackpool has come to face some of the most pronounced problems in the UK today. This has resulted in very low property prices as demand has fallen and buildings formerly used as tourist accommodation and small businesses, such as bed and breakfasts, have been turned into extremely cheap housing (CSJ, 2013). These are referred to as "HMOs" and the local authority has identified that approximately 3000 HMOs are operating in the town (Gazette, 2014). This extremely cheap housing has turned the seaside town into a "dumping ground for groups such as care leavers, people with substance abuse problems, those with mental health issues and ex-offenders, for whom placing authorities can easily find low cost accommodation" (CSJ, 2007: 6).

The "push factors" of those migrating to Blackpool were found to be "a variety centring on family breakdown, including domestic and other violence, the break-up of relationships and the establishment of new ones" (CSJ, 2007: 26). The plentiful supply of cheap hotels in the town makes it a desirable place to move to when shelter and anonymity is needed quickly for little money. During an interview with Simon Blackburn, he explained that even though Blackpool is a very small town, it has a dense population of approximately 142,000 people and this makes it easy for people to "disappear", at least for a while. People are also attracted by "actual or supposed availability of employment" as well as their "positive memories and perceptions of the resort" (CSJ, 2004: 26). These positive memories are usually based on experiences of visiting Blackpool as children during the summer holidays or partying with friends on a night out; both removed from the realities and problems of seasonality.

Although the statistics in this subchapter are from different time periods and some dates appear early, decline has been consistent and has continued in the same fashion up until the present time.



## THE ASHLEIGH HOTEL

The physical site of “The Ashleigh Hotel” or 44 Dickson Road is the centre of my research. It is a nineteen-bedroom Victorian terrace less than five hundred metres from Blackpool North Station and is an example of the town’s early “company” houses. These specialised “company houses” and company-house districts (Walton, 1998) were a feature of Blackpool’s growth in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, which were crucial to the success of the popular Summer holiday season. These specialised purpose-built guesthouses for working class visitors catered cheaply when the handful of sizeable hotels could accommodate only a small fraction of the growing visiting public. These were typically further inland and without a sea view, with only middle and upper class visitors able to pay for the privilege. Dickson Road still represents the features of the archetypal company house, with its distinctive tall bay windows, stucco front, four storey lodgings that once “shelter[ed] crowds of holidaymakers who practically fell across their thresholds from the nearby station entrance” (Walton, 1998: 68).

I will now jump to 1979 as it was while the town was in decline that Valerie Taylor, current owner of The Ashleigh Hotel, bought the property, which initially provided short-term holiday accommodation for visitors to the seaside town. In November of 1985, Valerie received a phone call from Blackpool Council asking if there was a vacant room in the hotel to temporarily accommodate a destitute family that they were having difficulty placing. The local council referred several more families to The Ashleigh Hotel and the high demand for long-term hostel type accommodation prompted Valerie to enter the private rented sector and the property is now considered an HMO. It is Valerie’s experience of running the site both as a hotel and HMO that makes her unique and crucial to a portrait of contemporary Blackpool.

Fourteen of the eighteen single occupant rooms are currently filled and the residents are largely “out-of-townners”, those who have moved to the seaside town from other parts of the UK, mostly England. However, there are a number of residents from Blackpool itself. Reasons for migrating to the town and residency in the building will

be explained in the next subchapter. All of the occupants consider The Ashleigh Hotel their only residence and all are unemployed and in receipt of benefit payments.

Rent includes bills and dinner which site owner, Valerie cooks personally seven days a week. Valerie employs one member of staff, Linda, who cleans the building and provides a laundry service six days a week. As some residents have learning difficulties, Valerie will assist them in organising doctor appointments, collecting prescriptions and benefit payments as well as responding to mail and phone calls. It is this care-like service that Valerie provides that particularly intrigued me about the site and is what contrasts so starkly with how other HMOs operate in the area, "many owned by "rogue" landlords using Blackpool's former hotels to house dozens of people in unsanitary conditions" (Kidd, 2010). The building has a high retention of tenants, the majority of which stay on a long-term basis usually lasting years.

## **RESIDENTS**

A process of selecting subjects to feature in the research project began with an initial visit to The Ashleigh Hotel without recording equipment two weeks before the planned shooting period. I went to meet all the residents and establish my role as a filmmaker and intentions for the research project. I explained that I would be in their domestic space for approximately a month and invited them to take part.

During this visit I was able to establish who responded well to me as an outsider and who was willing to give consent to appearing on camera and to be interviewed. Therefore, the four residents and member of staff who are shown speaking to camera in the film are all those who gave permission and have been included pragmatically to offer the biggest variety of narratives to the audience as possible. As Joan suffers from a condition that affects her memory, Linda and the other residents provided me with additional background information to fill in the gaps.

## **Joan**

At 74, Joan is the oldest tenant in the space and has lived there for thirty-five years. She has lived in Blackpool all of her life as well as being the only resident that has lived in the building while it was a functioning hotel and also after it made its transition into a HMO. She provides a unique experience of the town and hotel's past and contemporary Blackpool. Joan is one of two female subjects in the film and represents a minority of three women who live in the building.

Joan was involved in a cycling accident circa 1980's, colliding with a vehicle's open door and suffered from serious brain damage. As a result of the stress and trauma from the accident, Joan was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. After being discharged as a long-term inpatient, Joan's two children moved her to 44 Dickson Road instead of returning to the family home. Her son and daughter still live in Blackpool close to their mother however, rarely visit, the daughter having never actually entered the space before. The reason for this abandonment and absence is unknown to the other characters. Memory loss from the accident has caused Joan to believe she moved into the property after her elderly mother rejected Joan's offer to care for her in the family home, insisting that she have independence and that Joan leave. Although this is not explained in the film, Joan's confusion and fabrication of an alternative reality strongly embodies the tension between memory and reality explored by the film.

## **Mark**

Mark is the newest tenant of 44 Dickson Road, having relocated from Manchester in February due to finding city rent prices increasingly unaffordable after his landlord decided to sell the Chorlton flat he had been renting for several years. Mark is representative of other economically motivated residents pushed out of their home (either Manchester, Yorkshire or London) by gentrification and attracted by Blackpool's surplus of low-cost accommodation. Mark provides a useful perspective to the building's environment, having recently moved in compared to the majority of residents who have lived there for several years.

### **Richard**

Originally from Tiger Bay, a docking area in Cardiff, Richard has been a tenant for six years. He has lived nomadically throughout England for most of his life, originally travelling with "Chipperfield's Circus" and then living in a variety of sheltered accommodation similar to The Ashleigh Hotel. During a day visit to Blackpool alone, Richard had an epileptic fit and was admitted to a local hospital. Having been identified as homeless by a social worker, he was referred to The Ashleigh Hotel and has been there ever since.

### **Tony**

Originally from Wirral, Merseyside, Tony has a long history of being homeless and living transiently in hotel accommodation across the UK since leaving home as a young teenager. In this way, he adequately represents the majority of Dickson Road residents who have also been homeless or lived in sheltered accommodation for most of their life. Tony has lived in the building for approximately six years and moved in after divorcing his wife who was also homeless. Tony expresses a common trait amongst the majority of the men living in the building, all being single with the exception of two and indeed the wider scope of the town's HMO' tenant demographic who "generally are single men often struggling in seasonal work, on low income or in receipt of benefits". Tony is in receipt of incapacity benefits and Disability Living Allowance, following admittance to The Orchard, an in-patient mental health centre to treat his frequent nervous breakdowns.

### **Linda**

Linda has been the cleaner of 44 Dickson Road for six years. Having never been a cleaner before, Linda started her job at The Ashleigh after she was made redundant from her sales assistant position at British high street retail chain Woolworths following its administration and final closure in 2009. She is the only member of staff that owner Val and son Nestor employ representing a significant trust and order in their absence during the day. In addition to this, I believe she represents neutrality as she is able to enter and immerse herself in this private universe but lives and spends the majority of her time in the external. As she cleans the residents' domestic space

for them including washing their bedding and daily preparation of lunch, I believe she represents an element of maternal care.

## **SEASIDENESS**

To deepen my understanding of the residents' migration to Blackpool and to reveal the town's role to them, I think it is necessary to look at seasideness (Jarratt, 2015). This is a term coined by David Jarratt to describe sense of place and deep connection felt specifically at the seaside. According to Jarratt, "seasideness" is comprised of three main themes that I will explore in turn.

"Role of the sea" refers to the perceived characteristics of the sea and coast, which underpin the appeal of the place. The coastal environment and sea views create a "scale of vastness, power, timelessness and an aesthetic appreciation" (Jarratt, 2015: 356), that creates a perfect arena to experience expanded thought. When conducting a research project into the seaside resort of Morecambe, Jarratt interviewed repeat visitors from the North of England who considered the sea "reassuring or comforting and contrasted with pressures and challenges they faced in life" (Jarratt, 2015: 356). I believe these ideas of comfort are evoked in the film, with Linda and Val performing maternal duties of cleaning, laundry and the preparation of food for the residents. Those living there are seen to be cared for and in this way do not have to take complete responsibility for themselves in the way that a normal adult would. This echoes the traditional idea of the seaside providing respite and the idea of its air being restorative of health as well as "the therapeutic virtues of the local seawater" (Walton, 1998: 56).

"Spirituality" is used in its widest secular sense here and refers to reflection upon the self. Bachelard observed a connection between the limitlessness of the sea and the depth of "inner space within us all" (Bachelard 1994: 206). Research by Leila Dawney suggests that coastal path walkers in Dorset, England, experience a connection with nature (Dawney, 2014). The walkers even felt that they were a part of nature through their visits. The Morecambe visitors of Jarratt's research agreed that the shoreline

allowed “an interaction into nothingness, without any impingement from the contemporary man-made world or having to make continuous, conscious decisions” (Jarratt, 2015: 357). This is explored in the relaxed pace of my film created through the use of silence and long takes which I believe creates a similar meditative state. Subjects can deeply consider their answers to interview questions and in turn, the audience is afforded time to reflect on the dialogue in real time. As most of the dialogue heard in the film centres around accounts of the past, this too explores the idea of reflection said to be provided by a coastal environment. In addition to this, the notion of a coastal environment sheltering visitors from the encroaching manmade world is explored in my decision to never show the external Blackpool that the subjects refer to. This creates a clear border between the internal and external world suggesting an exilic detachment between those who live in The Ashleigh Hotel and what exists outside of its walls.

“Nostalgia” is an important element of the seaside. According to Jarratt’s respondents, “the seaside provides an unchanging backdrop against which childhood memories were formed”, (Jarratt, 2015: 358). Returning to these places in adulthood and undertaking family narratives can provide us with a tangible link to the past, provide us with a sense of perspective and can confirm individual identities. This bittersweet yearning for the past is what characterises nostalgia (Boym, 2001), an attempt to relive or recapture an essence of what has been lost. This idea of an unchanging backdrop is explored in the film through the significance placed on The Ashleigh Hotel’s interior. It’s architecture and design is expressive of a traditional seaside guesthouse, something that it is no longer. This is to project a sense of years gone by.

## **DOMESTIC SPACE**

As I am using the film medium to materialise the physical and symbolic change of Blackpool’s landscape through the place of The Ashleigh Hotel, I began to consider how to explore the internal world. In this section I will describe the structure of the site, the functions of the rooms and activities that take place inside. By approaching the film through the lens of domestic architecture, my intention is to think specifically

about the way in which residents inhabit The Ashleigh Hotel and in turn about the way it has influenced them and their methods of dwelling. I believe this will make me more aware of symbolic communication and nonverbal expression and able to think more broadly on the entwinement of the residents and place.

The kitchen is located in the basement of the building and is the only room in the building that is locked and inaccessible to residents. Richard is the only resident that owns a key to the kitchen; this indication of hierarchy will be explained later in the subchapter. The room is exclusively used by cleaner Linda and owner Val to complete laundry and cooking which includes a plate of sandwiches for lunch and dinner at 5pm. This questions the Victorian notion of the kitchen being the heart of the home as it is closed off from those who live there. However, sense of home in The Ashleigh Hotel is a complex notion. We consider home as space that is ours, where we are relatively free to assert our own identities (Cresswell, 2004). This is achieved through place-making activities such as adding our own possessions, rearranging the furniture, putting our own decorations on the walls. (Cresswell, 2004: 2). Residents of The Ashleigh are only allowed to add personal touches to their bedrooms whereas communal areas are opened and locked by owner Val and must be left untouched. This would suggest that residents' home is their bedroom rather than the building in its entirety. This division is also suggestive of why communal areas are not used frequently.

Meal times significantly contribute to the structure of the residents' day and part of their daily routine is collecting their sandwich from the lounge and in the evening, waiting in line at the kitchen door to be served dinner. This structure can be seen to be engrained into the building, as it was also present during the time it was a hotel. This is explained by Joan: "...It was bed and breakfast, then you went out. For meals it was finished then until the next day. When the old lady died the proprietors changed it [...] If you want a sandwich at dinner time you get one out of the lounge. That's lunch then you get your evening meal at tea time." This system spanning decades echoes David Seamon's theory that body mobility rather than authenticity and rootedness is the key component to understanding space (Cresswell, 2004: 33)

"Body mobility" can be understood as "movement below the level of conscious scrutiny" (Cresswell, 2004: 34) otherwise known as habit or routine. Seamon coined the term "place-ballet" when many routines are combined within a particular location. Despite residents functioning separately in their own rooms with communal areas being underused, the fact that meals are provided for sets a routine within location.

The kitchen also provides a link to the outside world as it is here that the building's telephone is, answered by Linda and Richard in the film. Firstly a family member unsuccessfully tries to contact "Jeff" who is in external Blackpool at the time of the call and Linda answers to a caller looking for a resident who does not live there anymore. These interactions, along with the fact that the telephone is installed in a room locked for the majority of the day shows a difficulty in communication and evokes a barrier between those in the external world and those living inside the building.

The kitchen is where I would usually interview Linda, the cleaner and ask her about her personal background and feelings towards The Ashleigh Hotel. Much like the front porch in *Grey Gardens* (1975), used by Little Edie to meet the Maysles each time they arrive with their cameras, "she shares confidences, desires, fears. The porch's exteriority protects her, gives her refuge, somewhat paradoxically from her mother's interference" (Rhodes, 2006: 96). The lock and underground location of the room provided us with intimacy and separation from the rest of the house.

Working our way up to the ground floor, handwritten notes signed by Valerie collate the front door and hallway entrance stating: "ANYONE WHO BRINGS ANYONE IN THE BUILDING WILL BE ASKED TO LEAVE." This immediately foregrounds an intolerance to outsiders and positions the landlady as a defender of the space and its characters from potential negative outside influences. Our willingness to protect *our* place from those who do not belong reveal the deeper significance of place to human "being". David Seamon has argued that a definitive feature of place as home is for the dweller to have some degree of control over what happens within a limited space



(Seamon, 1979). These strict rules are necessary for the successful management of the building as there are two other large HMO's at either side of The Ashleigh. This was confirmed in an interview with Simon Blackburn, who said that the people who live in these properties generally have chaotic lifestyles and social problems and tend to bring these difficulties to the area that they live in, fuelled by substance abuse and the town's party environment. The message is directed at residents' friends or acquaintances that may have intentions of damaging or stealing from the property or provoking the vulnerable people inside. Like the telephone in the kitchen, the front door creates a clear border between internal and external, private and public.

This defensiveness of the domestic place reminds me of Lilli, an elderly woman in the first scene of Marc Isaac's *Lift* (2001). In the film she says that the tower block was a paradise when she moved in twenty six years previous before going on to complain about it's current degeneration. The first words we hear in the film are Lilli's when she prevents a younger man from entering into the lift. She shouts: "You can't come in here! You can't come in here I said!" – Although it seems in jest, the words evoke a sense of residents protecting their dwelling from the encroaching other. Laura Rascaroli supports this argument, claiming that the Isaacs' filmic work is indeed concerned with the contemporary form of community, cohabitation and identity (Rascaroli, 2013).



'Lilli' in Marc Isaac's *Lift*

The hallways of the building are a strictly functional space for the residents, rarely congregating together outside of bedrooms. I made a decision to use these in-between areas a lot as the filmmaker, as well as standing in doorways rather than completely entering a room. I would announce to subjects that I would no longer come into their bedrooms to interview them but instead be on the other side of the door. I hoped this would encourage the residents to visit me and would clearly identify who genuinely wanted to speak to me through their own volition, similar to a confessional dynamic. I hoped this would galvanise these otherwise dormant areas of the domestic space. In the film the hallways mainly belong to Tony who directly approaches me for attention and conversation. He uses the hallway's bannisters to prompt a storytelling of the building's hotel past. Later he suggests, "Let's talk about the weather and what it's going to be like tonight" before an explicit demand of sorts, "Ask me anything you want to ask me". This reminds me of *Grey Gardens* (1975) where similarly the halls belong to Little Edie and is used most memorably by her in her dance performance to "We All March Together". In this sense we can see the hallways in both films as a stage, "in which visitors and inhabitants make entrances and exits and perform the roles assigned to them"(Rhodes, 2006: 99).



'Little Edie' in *Grey Gardens*

The living room is the only communal room that is always accessible by residents. Traditionally a space where social activities are performed, this has been somewhat undone by residents who choose a preference for solitude in bedrooms upstairs. The

room is now a space almost exclusively used for waiting. Left idle until the late afternoon, character Ashley inhabits the room at approximately 4pm every day and anticipates landlady Val's arrival in silence. The arrival of Val's car outside the building prompts him to run to the door, leaving the building interior and assist her in carrying belongings and the evening's dinner preparations back into to the kitchen downstairs.

It is the only room apart from four bedrooms upstairs that provide a view onto the busy Dickson Road. As the filmmaker, I was practically ignored in this room while the subject's attention was always deflected onto the outside world. I believe this calls to mind long iconographic tradition in which "view from the window" represented the relation between self and the world. The German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich developed the tradition by introducing a figure at the window as seen in *Woman at the Window* (1822). Ewa Lajer-Burcharth states that figure in such images acts as a "signpost of essentially exilic position in relation to the observed world" (Lajer-Burcharth, 2010: 142). This painterly quality evident in the work of Edward Hopper will be explained later on in my dissertation.



Woman at the Window (1822) by CD Friedrich

The dining room of the house is also a communal area and I show this as an empty space in the beginning of my film. I would have filmed the room being used by subjects when eating their evening meal however, the residents that did eat their dinner here were those who did not wish to appear on camera. Later in the filming process I decided to only film subjects when they were alone in a room or space and therefore this would have also made footage from this room redundant as it usually contained a small group of people.

Residents' bedrooms are on the second and third floor of which there are eighteen in total however, in the film we are only granted access to five, one not presently

inhabited. This is again echoed in *Grey Gardens* (1975) where there are twenty-eight rooms however, in the film we only see five (the hallways, the dining room, and three upstairs bedrooms). Rhodes points out that a cognitive dissonance is generated by the sheer size of the house as viewed from outside and the few rooms that are actually shown to us in the film which charges it with an excess that is more felt than seen. (Rhodes, 2006) I was only given permission to enter into a minimal amount of bedrooms and film a small fraction of those who lived there, the doors close to me creating an absence of presence in the interior. There are obviously more rooms to go into, more things to see.

All bedrooms in the building are of a similar size and cost the same amount of rent per month however, there are two rooms that face onto street with large windows. These bedrooms belong to Joan, the resident with the longest tenancy and Richard who is the second oldest tenant and also aforementioned informal gatekeeper. Richard explained to me that Val gave him this room specifically so that he can watch who enters and exits front door. This suggests a sort of hierarchy similar to that of a hotel room with a sea view. Although not sea facing, these residents of apparent higher status have the privilege of viewing the external world.

The life of a resident is individually orientated. All bedrooms have an external lock, similar to a front door. Most of living and entertaining is done here equipped with wardrobe, mirror and sink, kettle and a television. Joan exemplifies this in the film, making tea and a snack for me on her set of bedroom drawers. This is echoed in *Grey Gardens* (1975) where Big Edie and Little Edie predominantly live in a bedroom upstairs. Towards end of film, Little Edie enters the room and complains of its condition.

Little Edie: We have to hang the portraits and clean the room!

Big Edie: I'm not ashamed of anything. Where my body is a very precious place. It's concentrated ground.



Big Edie and Little Edie in *Grey Gardens*

With the phrase “concentrated ground” in mind, the lives of the Beale women and house are both studies in an intensity, density and specificity of being in one place, in particular time in particular manner (Rhodes, 2006: 100). In a similar way, the bedrooms of The Ashleigh Hotel are microcosms, their own little home within a home and indeed the building a microcosm of contemporary Blackpool. This echoes Bachelard’s consideration of the home as a primal space that acts as a first world or first universe that then frames our understandings of all the spaces outside. (Bachelard, 1994)

## CHAPTER TWO - PRACTICE

There are two central aims within my research. Firstly, to use film practice to address the tensions between reality and memories of a landscape maintained on nostalgia. Secondly, to produce an artist documentary on one dwelling symptomatic of a wider transformation undergone by a seaside town and in this way, create a portrait of the external without ever leaving the internal. In this chapter, I will describe my filmmaking practice and methods that I used to achieve these aims.

Much of my practice is focused on personal narratives and how human condition can be shaped by place. This led me to choose observational and participatory filmmaking methodologies, which would offer a way of accommodating intimate and insightful responses from subjects. During my practice-led research I found myself trying to decipher if my practice was that of a documentary filmmaker or artist, or can I be both? Perhaps this question highlights the fact that my creative work with artistic ambition does have responsibilities as I am working with real lives. Observational and participatory modes of documentary (Nichols, 2010) each pose their own series of ethical considerations and it was important to explore those in order to protect the rights of my subjects whilst also facilitating my artistic expression. During the research period, my main stylistic and narrative device was to spatially restrict myself, only filming inside of The Ashleigh Hotel and never leaving the internal setting. I will explore *Lift* (2001) and *Manakamana* (2013), two films that also exercise this technique to provide a context for my own work. I will go on to describe the interview, framing and editing methods that I used.

### DEVELOPING MY METHODOLOGY

In my research, I used two distinct methods while working with subjects. I began the research project by recording interviews which were organised and scheduled in advance. These scenes can be considered as examples of the participatory mode of documentary (Nichols, 2010) where the filmmaker “interact[s] with his or her subjects rather than unobtrusively observe them”. (Nichols, 2010: 179). In the other scenes of

the film, I used a hybridity of participatory and observational modes of documentary. At first I would observe what happened in front of the camera without intervention (Nichols, 2010) and then decide to interact with subjects depending on the impromptu dialogue or situation that would unfold. Bill Nichols confirms that most films incorporate more than one mode, which serve as “a skeletal framework that individual filmmakers flesh out according to their own creative disposition” (Nichols, 2010: 143).

An aim of my research project was to use the personal narratives of The Ashleigh residents to address the tension between memory and present day. To achieve intimate accounts of experience from the residents, I felt it was necessary to speak to them directly through interview questions. Bill Nichols acknowledges that interviews are useful in the telling of social history, the “articulateness and emotional directness of those who speak give films a highly compelling quality” (Nichols, 2010: 194). I agree and believe the interview was a useful tool to bring several different accounts together in order to form a cohesive narrative.

I interviewed the majority of subjects in their bedroom. This was an agreed space for me to ask them personal questions and the dialogue between us would not begin until the camera was rolling. I specifically designed my questions to be relatively open and worded simply: Where are you from? How long have you been here? Why did you decide to come to Blackpool? Did you come here as a child? Questions were kept short so that I spoke as few words as possible. My thinking here was that fewer words equated to less direction from myself and allowed the subject to interpret the question and take it into a direction that they wanted to. With this in mind, my interview questions could be considered as conversational prompts, which I believed created a non-invasive way of working.

After I asked my initial question in an interview, I would restrain myself from responding to subjects’ answers or indeed questions that they posed to me in return. Marc Isaacs uses a similar approach as he explains working on *Lift*: “I purposefully don’t say anything to break the silence and the awkwardness, my instinct was to crack

a joke or something but it's much better to shut up and let it be" (Isaacs and Quinn, 2013). I would remain behind the camera and would avoid direct eye contact with the subject by looking downwards into the camera's viewfinder. I wanted to make the subjects feel obliged to fill the silence themselves and believed that what they chose to fill it with would be revealing of their character. A focus of my research project was to explore human condition affected by place and I believed this approach would produce an honest insight into what the subjects were thinking in that moment. Michael Foucault argues that forms of interview all "have root in the religious tradition of confessional" (Nichols, 2010: 190). In this respect, their answers can be seen as things they voluntarily wanted to "get off their chest". I would make the decision to speak again if I sensed that the subject felt awkward or uncomfortable or if it was obvious that the subject would not respond independently any longer.

The more time I spent in The Ashleigh Hotel, the more my confidence grew in the narrative that was evolving from the sit-down interviews. I decided that I could afford to experiment with an interview approach consisting more of a chance dynamic and proceeded to observationally film "lived experience spontaneously" (Nichols, 2010: 172). I started to work in this way by announcing to subjects that I would no longer enter their bedrooms and if they wanted to talk to me, I would be with my camera in a hallway or an empty room in the house. I would wait to see who would walk into frame, what they would do and if they would acknowledge me. Depending on the feeling I got from the situation, I would then decide to interact with them. During the preproduction of *Lift* (2001), Isaacs initially met residents in their individual flats around the tower block and recalls meeting the "religious sister" (who gifts him prayer cards in the film) and finding her apartment covered in religious iconography that "said so much about who she was and how she was living". After seeing the potential of an interesting character and narrative he invited her to the filming space: "if you ever want to talk to me about your religious beliefs feel free to talk to me about that in the lift" (Birmingham City University, 2013:17min 06).





Catholic resident presenting Marc Isaacs with gifts

Linda would approach me and invite me to follow and film her in the room she would be cleaning next. Richard would often wait for me outside the kitchen if he knew I was alone and make me a cup of tea. Tony would wait silently in the end of hallways, sometimes bringing me snacks or a bottle of water. I thought this was interesting as these interactions were born out of participants' boredom and lack of activity in the building. I believed this showed a mutual need for each other: They wanted someone to talk to and I was interested in hearing their personal narratives. Ilona Hongisto identifies a similar "cohesion" between the Maysles brothers and the Beales in *Grey Gardens* (1975) producing a 'remarkable sociability in the world of the film [...] and foreground the collective character of the filmmaking process. It is not only the Maysles who participate in the everyday drama of the Beales, but the Beales equally enable the making of the film" (Hongisto, 2015: 78). The participatory mode has the ability to provide the viewer with "a sense of what it is like for the filmmaker to be in a given situation and how that situation alters as a result" (Nichols, 2010: 181). By indexing the nature of interactions between myself and the residents, I clearly foreground myself as an arrival to the space and subject's clear appreciation of newness and interaction is indicative of The Ashleigh Hotel being a threshold that is not crossed often.

A strong example of this in my film is the scene where I tell Tony to "come closer". He responds, "Come closer? How far? [...] I won't bite. How close? Ask me any question

you want to ask me". Twelve seconds of silence proceeds before I ask him what his happiest childhood memory is. There is an interesting dynamic of control here, which reminds me of a scene in Molly Dineen's *Heart of the Angel* (1989). Towards the end of the film, a ticket seller reflects on the meaning of life and talks at Dineen, dominating the dialogue for almost four minutes. He poses to her behind the camera; "You don't ask to be born, do you? You're waiting to die, aren't you? Dreams you can have, but it's not the same as achieving something is it?" The subject steers the conversation while the filmmaker remains silent from behind camera. However, power is restored to Dineen when the ticket seller asks her permission to have a drink of water and asks her for validation, "You think I'm lovely don't you?"

Returning to my scene, the silence amplified by Tony's intimidating stature creates a power shift where I am effectively cornered and could be translated as a moment where I am lost for words. I regain control by ending the silence and interjecting with a personal question about his childhood.



Interview with ticket seller in *Heart of the Angel*

## CENTRAL ETHICAL ISSUES IN PARTICIPATORY AND OBSERVATIONAL DOCUMENTARY MODES

I conducted my research project in a building that was a home to a large group of residents and a workplace to one employee. I was conscious of the trust and relationships that had been born from filming inside of The Ashleigh Hotel three times a week for over month. The majority of the subjects did not have family networks and the building was a threshold not crossed very often so in some cases subjects became particularly attached to me and appreciative of my visits. They weren't used to outsiders, let alone those who were filming them. When the research project came to an end and I left, I wanted to ensure that subjects were unharmed by the process and therefore it was important for me to understand the subjects' rights and carry out my research in an ethical manner. I chose to work in the observational

and participatory documentary mode (Nichols, 2010) that both pose their own series of ethical considerations, which I will explore in turn.

Bill Nichols addresses the case of an observational filmmaker and poses the question of whether subjects conduct themselves in ways that will 'colour the viewers' perception of them in order to satisfy a filmmaker who does not say what they want. (Nichols, 2010:175) To avoid this, it was important for me to have the informed consent of the participants and for this to happen, I had to ensure that they had a clear understanding of my intentions for the research project. Before meeting the participants for the first time, I e-mailed and posted physical copies of an information sheet and consent forms to Nestor and Valerie Taylor to distribute among residents. This explained that I was interested in the histories, experiences and human condition of those living in Blackpool and HMO buildings formerly used as bed and breakfast accommodation. I clearly stated their participation was voluntary, they could withdraw at any time and they would never be asked to do or say something that wasn't directly linked to their own experiences. I wanted them to be aware of the fact that their behavior would be observed by an audience after the research project was completed and explained in the information sheet that it would possibly be shown in a non-commercial environment such as university, a film festival or gallery however, it would not be shown on television. I was confident that I had represented them in an impartial manner and stated they would receive a copy of the film on its completion.

Nichols has identified that participatory documentaries involve the ethics and politics of encounter; the encounter between one who wields a camera and one who does not. It was important to take into consideration how to negotiate control and share responsibility in the filmmaking process so there was respect and a balance that dismissed unfair manipulation. This is referred to as a "working consensus" (Hongisto, 2015:73) to describe the relationship between the Maysles brothers and the Beales in *Grey Gardens*. Before interviewing subjects, I scheduled a mutually convenient time for us to talk as well as giving them a rough idea of topics we would work through. I believed that by giving them some preparation time, they would feel

equipped and more confident to engage in the interview and hoped this would translate as a sign of respect from me of them. As I was concerned with the personal narratives and histories of the residents, I was aware that recounting memories could possibly be sensitive and uncomfortable for them. I felt a responsibility for any potential emotional aftermath of an interview. When speaking to residents, I didn't push for an answer that they didn't necessarily want to give or clarify. An example of this is the interview with Joan when she explains that her mother rejected her offer to care for her in old age, which led to her being homeless. I felt that Joan had opened up to me, I was grateful for this and therefore it didn't feel necessary to further question her about her relationship with her mother. I thought it was important to clearly show in the film what subjects did not want to discuss or move on from and this is done in the way that the film is structured: rather than using intrusive questions, the viewer can make up their own mind about the answers given.

### **VISUALISING THE INTERIOR AND EXTERIOR WORLD**

During the research period, my main stylistic and narrative device was to spatially restrict myself, only filming inside The Ashleigh Hotel and never leaving the internal setting. There are a number of documentary films that use space as a central element and two that interest particularly made an impression on me were Marc Isaac's *Lift* (2001) and *Manakamana* (2013). I will go on to explain each film's different purpose in doing so to compare with my own intentions.

Filmed on Super 16-mm and directed by Stephanie Spray and Pacho Velez of Harvard Sensory Ethnography Lab, *Manakamana* (2013) takes place high above the Nepalese jungle where pilgrims make an ancient journey to worship "Manakamana". The film is composed of eleven of these journeys, each captured in a single static take. People or groups of people and in one instance, a group of goats, ride uphill absorbing the landscape, talk about mundane matters and/or dwell on inner thoughts-then ride down again. (Schauble, 2015)

*Manakamana* is in fact the temple of the wish fulfilling Hindu goddess Bhagwhati. The temple is situated on a ridge 4272ft above sea level and originally could only be

reached by walking uphill for around three hours however, the installation of the cable car system in 1998 cut this journey down to ten minutes. With this in mind, the film itself does not actually explain (with words) what the name of the temple means or why people undertake the pilgrimage. This lack of background information and interpretation stays true to the Harvard Sensory Ethnography Lab manifesto which states: “It opposes the traditions of art that are not deeply infused with the real, those of documentary that are derived from broadcast journalism, and those of visual anthropology that mimic the discursive inclinations of their mother discipline”(HSEL, 2010:online). In this respect, it could be said that the filmmakers of the SEL focus on the aesthetic and/or sensory experience of their protagonists while considering context as an overrated element of their artistic work (Schäuble, 2015). Here lies the purpose of the film’s spatial methodology, as Michaela Schauble concludes, “the filmmakers are not interested in the representation of a Nepalese pilgrimage, but rather in exploring the aesthetics and ontology of their protagonists’ “lifeworlds”. The focus is instead what the affect the visit has had on them. (Schauble, 2015: 205)



Cable car travellers in

*Manakamana*

Similarly, my research project focuses on the affect the outside world has had on the subjects however, I have forsaken an image of it rather than background information. From the first interview with Linda, we know we are in Blackpool, from the first greeting made on the phone, we know we are in “The Ashleigh”. Three residents

explain to us why they moved into the building. In this way, you could say my space-based approach is the opposite of *Manakamana's* where the landscape scrolls past, providing a constantly seen backdrop. By having an absence of landscape iconography, I hoped to create tension from an ever-present entity that is never seen and bring to the forefront the richness of the personal narratives in the space.

Also a mode of transport and space of transience, *Lift* (2001), Marc Isaacs' twenty-five minute digital video documentary is almost entirely set inside an elevator in an East London tower block. Isaacs spent two months, standing sometimes for entire days, talking for a couple of minutes at a time to the residents travelling up and down, from their floors to the ground floor and vice versa (Nightingale and Isaacs, 2009). Spatial methodology is at the heart of Isaacs' cinema and he has confirmed the importance of location in interviews: "When I start a project, I am usually in a space that is suggestive, that has a certain meaning attached to it; and I am looking for characters within that space that can develop that idea" (Nightingale and Isaacs 2009). The filmmaker aims to create a place that is at once real and metaphoric. In a literal sense, the lift encapsulates all lifts and confined spaces of transit which are not only people carriers but also tend to produce not always comfortable experience of space. Laura Rascaroli argues that because of the variety of passengers we encounter in it, the tower-block lift can be said to be a microcosmic representation of the outside city and indeed of spaces of increasingly larger scale: East London, London; postcolonial Europe; the urban West. With this in mind, Isaacs can be seen to be holding a "critical mirror" (Rascaroli, 2013) to the outside world, asking us to consider multi-ethnic cohabitation and class in the space we dwell in ourselves.

I am using the single location of The Ashleigh Hotel in a very similar way. Literally, it is a former guesthouse that used to accommodate tourists on holiday. Now, it houses benefit claimants on a long-term basis, usually spanning years, who are effectively homeless. As Joan says in the film, this is "where you can come if you've no home". As The Ashleigh's transition into a HMO with all residents in receipt of welfare payments, the site can be seen as a microcosmic representation of outside Blackpool

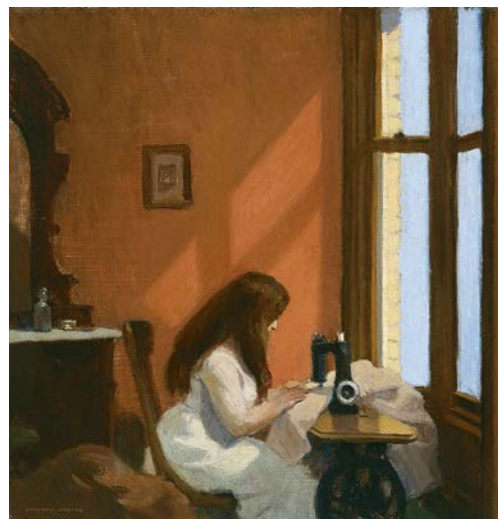
and indeed the rest of the UK where “landlords benefit from the vagaries of housing benefit” (Blackpool Council, 2015:9).

My intention is to raise an aforementioned “critical mirror” to the outside world, asking the viewer to consider the current identity of the British coast, a supposed durable element of our national identity. In addition to this, I want to provide a sensitive portrait of subjects and many others around the country are in this situation, humanising them and giving their legitimate poignant personal narratives a voice. I believe this is important whilst in the midst of British media fuelling resentment towards benefit claimants through outputs such as Channel 4's *Skint*, Channel 5's *On Benefits and Proud*, BBC 3's *People Like Us* which I believe to “demonize, mock and attack voiceless, struggling people” (Jones, 2014).

In my research project, I use long static takes consistently through my film as seen in *Manakamana*, each shot designed to be an episode or mini-drama. Michael Schauble states that this “functionality of repetition enable the filmmakers to find and release complexity in the realm of the simple”(Schauble, 2015:205). As the cable car rides unfold in real time with the camera never breaking away, this allows for a process of slowing down and engaging with one's counterpart(s), observing closely and directly. In this same way, I wanted my audience to stand back and just look, giving the viewer respect and the responsibility to translate and interpret the non-verbal in the frame. I believe my methodology calls to mind the paintings of Edward Hopper, whose imagery has always had an affinity with cinema: “his best works appear like the freeze frames from a lifelong movie. Hopper's viewpoints, framing and lighting frequently appropriate movie and theatre conventions” (Renner, 2015:66). Although his work has a connection to the cinematic, it is the idea of the everyday that he presents in this way: his figures are generally in “situations that are unsensational, unspectacular – in fact common-place” (Kranzfelder, 2008:38).

Hopper too had a visual interest in the interior and its symbolic potential. I am drawing parallels specifically between the window iconography in his work that is also

a significant motif in my research project. In reference to *Compartment C* (Hopper, 1938), the view from the window suggests “a divorce from the natural world” (Renner, 1994). It is not just the windows in Hopper’s images that provide a sense of separation, but also the situations that he depicted figures in. A consistent theme in his work is solitary figures choosing to engage in activities that separate themselves from others. Sometimes the figure is shown at work, as in *Girl at a Sewing Machine* (Hopper, 1921) and at other times people read, as does the woman in *Barber Shop* (Hopper, 1931) and *Hotel Lobby* (1943). Similarly in my film, subjects are generally shown alone in rooms either in the middle of watching television, completing cleaning chores or simply waiting. Both sets of characters are presented as lost in thought, they are “psychologically remote, existing in a private space of dreams and contemplation” (Levin, 1997:42).



Hopper's *Compartment C* (1938) and *Girl at a Sewing Machine* (1921)

When a window was present in the frame, I purposefully overexposed the video image so that the light from outside formed a bright white box that usually was central in the composition. I believe this gives an infinite-like space within the frame. My intention was for this to echo the scale of vastness and escapism that is provided by the coastal environment as previously explained in the “Seasideness” chapter. In addition to this, the blank space allows the viewer to mentally project what they want onto it, the image that is formed in the mind from the words spoken by the subjects particularly those about the outside world. In the first interview of the film, Linda recounts visiting the beach, “I’ve took a walk down there, watch the tide coming and



hear the waves crashing.” Mark reflects on his childhood memories of 1970’s Blackpool, “The trams and the lights... and the fair.” The reality of the view from the residents’ windows are neighboring terraces and heavy traffic on Dickson Road however, by removing this reality we can instead place the outside world that the subjects are describing and in this way attempt to make their memories a reality. This of course echoes the idea of nostalgia, a main theme in the research project where one “cherry picks” what they want to remember (or in this case, see) as there is more positive feeling projected onto nostalgia than the present.

Using wide shots allowed me to accentuate straight lines so that the subjects were contained within rigid vertical sections. In other words, I used the architecture of the building as a framing tool itself with the intention of evoking a sense of control and status from the site as if a character in its own right. Something similar can be said of Chantal Akerman’s geometry of passages and symmetrical compositions in *Hotel Monterey* (1972), frames fixed as if to seize motion. Ewa Lajer-Burchart argues that by keeping the inhabited interior front and centre, “rather than mere location, the interior space has been the protagonist of her work”(Lajer-Burcharth, 2010: 143). I believe this is to create a powerful impression of what it is to be an outsider observing these locales. Patiently observed and meticulously composed, the hotel interiors may be seen to echo the Heideggerian question, “What is it to dwell?” (Lajer-Burcharth, 2010:143). Hopper also expressed an interest in the psychology and environment of the traveller, the location of the hotel has provided a provocative setting in a number of his works *Hotel Room* (Hopper, 1931), , *Hotel Lobby* (Hopper, 1943), *Hotel Window* (Hopper,1956) and *Western Motel* (Hopper, 1957). The subjects shown in these bedrooms and lobbies are unable to look at each other if in a group or are otherwise seen alone engrossed in thought or reading material. Gail Levin claims that this was to “accentuate a sense of non-communication, to reveal a poignant lack of emotional interaction and a longing for places beyond the window” (Levin, 1994:49). Indeed, the wide shot approach in my film involved me positioning the camera and myself in a doorway, never completely entering a room. My intention was to create a sense of the aforementioned outsider on the periphery, gaining an insight into how these people live.



Hotel hallways in Chantal Akerman's *Hotel Monterey*

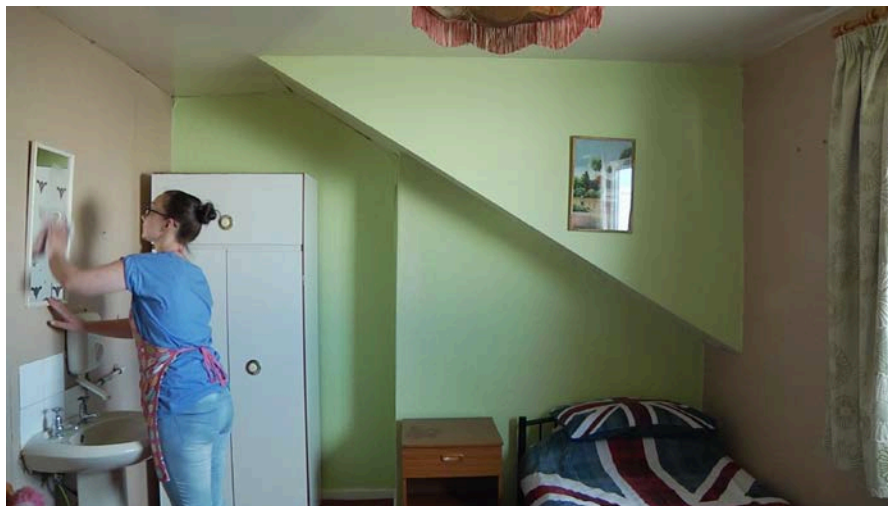


A focus of my research was to evoke a sense of history and memory of Blackpool and its identity as a traditional British coastal holiday resort. By implementing wide framing, I was able to emphasise the interior design of The Ashleigh Hotel whose furnishings, colour schemes and textures held evidence of outdated fashion. I think this was particularly notable in the uninhabited bedroom of the opening scene, living room and dining room. I believe tension was provided when a subject in modern clothing was in these spaces, for example the men in their modern tracksuits. I used this framing methodology to emphasise the great height of rooms, which continue out of frame. My aim in this was to highlight the building's Victorian architecture.

Practically, having a still camera allowed me to be more relaxed and confident as a filmmaker. Given the size of The Ashleigh Hotel and the amount of residents, there are many possibilities of where to be and many different people's actions to follow. Resigning to the fact I couldn't be everywhere at once, I took inspiration from *Sleep Furiously* (2007) and Gideon Koppel's "aesthetic approach [...] involving a static camera and very long takes in which "a story" could play out" (Koppel, 2007:320). Koppel's method was inspired by Austrian novelist Peter Handke's *Once Again for Thucydides* (Handke, 1998), a book of short pieces of writing, "microepics". The filmmaker explains, "each text is an evocation of a moment, place in time and gesture, and each as if that moment had been dissected and opened up under a microscope. Each was also a story" (Koppel, 2007:320). Handke's attention to detail influenced the filmmaker to think differently about creating stories, realising that narrative shouldn't necessarily depend on action in time; "My mother walking across

the valley was after all a story, not simply because of the action, but because of the light, the wind, the moving shadows, the sense of isolation and vulnerability in the composition”(Koppel, 2007:318).

In addition to practical reasons, I kept my camera stationary as I became more aware of the insight that can be gained from the seemingly ordinary and everyday. Although no sensational actions take place in the film and interview questions are kept minimal, I believe what is said and the one-way perspective of rooms I provide do speak volumes. I believe a strong example of this is the opening shot of Linda cleaning. The strange dimensions of the room create vertical and horizontal lines as well as different depths to the image which is amplified by a fringed Victorian lampshade in the foreground. The walls are a bright lime colour, upon which Linda’s shadow moves across while dusting the mirror. A Union Jack bedspread effectively hints at our whereabouts and the national pride of those who live there and indeed the town. It provides the viewer with a clue, visiting the seaside is a very English thing to do. Like Koppel and the shot of his mother, I believe the image is sufficiently stimulating and evocative to be allowed to play out and hold its own.



Linda cleaning a bedroom in The Ashleigh Hotel

## CHAPTER THREE- LEARNING

This final chapter will explain why I chose to work in the way that I did during my research project, demonstrating how my research aims have been addressed through my filmmaking practice. I have presented this analysis in a series of tensions: Then and Now, Closeness & Distance, Isolation & Community, Internal & External. As my main research aim was to address the tension between memory and the present, it seemed appropriate and efficient to present the other thematic areas of the film in paired juxtapositions. In addition to this, as the research project was a vast and overwhelming process, by breaking it down into five sections, it made it easier for me to recount my decisions.

### THEN AND NOW

To successfully achieve my research aim of producing an internal setting symptomatic of the outside world, I wanted to include as many residents and personal narratives in the film as possible. Laura Rascaroli argues that Marc Isaacs' tower block lift achieves a metaphorical status because of the variety of passengers we encounter in it (Rascaroli, 2013), the spectrum of social actors acting as representatives of different cultures, religions, race, generations and gender. Of the fourteen residents that lived in The Ashleigh Hotel at the time of study, I was able to gain access to four and one employee. This meant that the filming process was more focused and manageable. I was able to give each subject a substantial amount of my attention, developing a long relationship and trust with those involved. I believe having five subjects in total created a more coherent narrative for a viewer to follow.

The subjects you see in the film are those that voluntarily welcomed me into their private space and explicitly showed an eagerness to talk. In this way, we can be seen to need each other and therefore had a mutually beneficial relationship. Linda would let me know where she would be in the building and at what time and her involvement in amateur dramatics was evident in her enthusiasm to be involved in the research project, which I found incredibly endearing. She was a reliable source of action and

relief in a building of often unpredictable and absent residents. As well as her appearing twice throughout the film, I made the decision to bookend the film with Linda as she can be considered as the only active subject that we see.

Mark possessed a self-awareness of his living situation that I did not find in other residents and his equally unique understanding of the coastal landscape's significance provided poetic responses to interview questions that resonated with my own consideration of the exterior landscape of Blackpool.

I was drawn to Joan as she functioned as an encompassing symbol for memory within the film, which was heightened by her evocative storytelling ability. She was referred to as "Nana of the place", which I immediately empathised with and trusted was a figure that viewers would respond affectionately to.

Tony's dependence on my presence throughout the research project created a strange child-like regression that echoed my interest in childhood experiences of Blackpool. Before the filming process, it was this theme of childhood experiences of the town that I expected interviews to mainly centre around which provide an explanation for subjects' return and dwelling in the town as adults. This presumption was based on earlier interviews with Val and Nestor Taylor in my previous project *Resort*. When asked what they think brings residents to the town and The Ashleigh Hotel, they responded:

Nestor: I think people with learning difficulties, they've come here on a holiday and they've seen the illuminations. I think the illuminations and The (Blackpool) Tower attracts them and it's a childhood thing for them. Here is where they want to come, back to good memories.



Still from interview with Nestor in *Resort* (2015)

Mark was able to describe childhood memories of Blackpool however, this was answered minimally while other residents either through forgetfulness or suppression could not provide a detailed response. By encountering this, the filming process prompted me to think of different ways of expressing memory in tension with present day reality. It was important for me to be flexible and sensitive in my approach to get the response I needed from the subjects. I continued to ask questions about the past but now focusing on time passing more specifically inside The Ashleigh Hotel.

- When did you move in here?
- How long have you been here?
- Are you waiting for someone?
- You've been here a very long time...

These questions sustained themselves through the research project, as I would repeat them on separate occasions to receive slightly alternating responses as well as relying on thematically different questions and chance encounters to fill our dialogue.

As well as focusing interview questions on memory, I physically addressed the tension between memory and present day reality by using a strict visual framework of wide framing throughout the whole film. This was to bring attention to the interior detailing of The Ashleigh Hotel; it's high ceilings, and corridors lined with locked doors, dusty fringed lampshades and rooms of all different colours, orange, purple and green. Wide framing allowed me to stress the width and length of communal spaces like the living room and dining room. All of these characteristics dismiss the likelihood of the place being a normal residential home and are indicative of its history as a seaside guesthouse. As well as a visual framework, my intention was for the interiors to provide a constant backdrop throughout the film, using them as a physical reminder of what the building once was in case the subjects didn't explicitly explain this them-selves.

I further directed this attention to the interior by holding the viewers' gaze through long takes, with scenes unfolding in real time. This creates a tableau-like quality and the film can be seen as a series of still images. David MacDougall argues that social scientists are afraid of still photographs and prefer film because "still images contain too many meanings whereas the desirability of film lies precisely in its ability to constrain meaning through narrative chains of signification...They close off plural readings in the temporal flow of succession an destruction"(MacDougall, 1998:2010). I disagree, my intention is to give the viewer more time to hold onto qualities that are so often lost when shots are constructed. David MacDougall argues that it is almost self-evident that the amount of time we look at an image affects what we see in it and interpret it; "the eye successively scans an image in a series of fixations. If the time for doing this is cut short, the eye fixes on fewer point and the mind creates less extensive version of what David Marr has called the "primal sketch"(MacDougall, 1998:212). I want the space to be held in the viewers' imagination.

The idea of memory directly influenced the medium specificity in my research project. Having initially experimented with a lo-fi aesthetic in my last project, *Resort*, I made a decision not to use a DSLR camera. Instead I chose a Panasonic 151 camcorder, which is a dated camera choice for 2016. My intention here was to promote a slight sense of removal in the film and to amplify the idea of The Ashleigh Hotel being a repository of memories; symbolic of and foregrounded in the past. The low-resolution imagery in the research project reminds me of home movies, typically made to preserve a visual record of family activities, usually holidays, which I felt lent itself to my focus on childhood experiences of a seaside resort. My interest in videotape format influenced the name of the research project, 'Over And Over'. I began thinking of how new footage is recorded on tape and the way in which previously stored footage is 'taped over'. I felt this strongly echoed the idea of nostalgia and the act of amending memories of the past to ward off ill feelings of the present.



Hi-8 footage of Blackpool Sands beach in *Resort* (2015)

## CLOSENESS AND DISTANCE

In my last project, *Resort*, I generally made the editorial decision to not include my own voice when asking interview questions however, you can hear me from behind the camera on two occasions as well as seeing an image of me filming in the opening sequence. I realise now over a year later that this is when I first began to experiment with explicitly featuring myself in my work. Stella Bruzzi believes that the documentary filmmaker's inclusion of their voice in their film is arguably about marking out territory, claiming the documentary as their own (Bruzzi, 2011). I agree here and admit I like to indulge in a clear ownership and authorship of my work however, my initial motivations were to evoke an honesty, to partly show how I achieved a shot or why a subject responded in the way that they did. In this respect, showing my work process and beginning to adopt a less seamless and less polished final product, which I identified with more as a practitioner and viewer myself.



Myself captured on The Ashleigh hotel's CCTV camera as see in *Resort* (2015)



Now, as I begin to show the first edit of the research project to my peers, a common first comment is on the prevalence of myself as a character in the film. I found this interesting as I was aware during the filming process that I wanted the audience to hear my questions however, I thought that this would merely provide viewers with more information rather than a sense of who I was.

I now understand that I am directly involved in the film, I am not just passively capturing action. Amongst my interview questions, I thank Joan for her offering of tea and biscuits and stating that I prefer her new room. At one point you can hear me laughing with her as she swings her arms animatedly; "All to meself!" Not only am I asking the residents of the Ashleigh Hotel a question, I am choosing to include my reactions to them.

This is suggestive of intimacy although not the usual intimacy associated with documentary where an audience is brought close to the subject and environment in which the encounters have taken place. Rather, an intimacy between the audience and myself as a filmmaker. Although this seems obvious, it was nevertheless difficult for me to acknowledge personally. During the making of *A Sketchbook for the Library Van* (2005), Gideon Koppel also realised that his role as cinematographer could also appear as "interpreter" or "commentator". He explains:

"The first turning point in my approach was when, in a telephone conversation, a friend reminded me of the observation that the story of the film is "my story". I responded by saying that "I do not have a story in this farming community; I had not lived here for thirty years. It is only my mother who lives here – my father died twenty-five years ago and all that is left of him is a gravestone at the head of the valley". "Precisely", said my friend, and put the phone down" (Koppel, 2007:318).

My "story" was that vulnerable and exilic people had let me into their home and over the weeks, I became "part of the furniture" and their everyday routine. In some cases, we had formed friendships. I wanted my voice position to be that of an inquisitive outsider and willing listener without preconceptions or judgment of those inside, this

is how I wished the audience to accept them. I must admit, I feel protective over them. I constructed this voice through a balance of control and restraint, predominantly by asking short, direct questions followed by prolonged silences.

## **ISOLATION AND COMMUNITY**

During the filming period of my research project, I read an online review of *Lift* (2001) where the subjects of the film are referred to as “the lost souls of dirty hallways” (Hocking, 2011:online). This immediately reminded me of the residents of The Ashleigh Hotel. They are out of place and out of time, deciding not to engage with the present when living in a town with a historically determined identity. Their long-term stays are in a building and town originally designed for transient holidaymakers. They are without a family network or employment and this void of legitimate or concrete purpose for being there evokes the same sense of purgatory to me as this quote.

I wanted to amplify this in my film and made the decision to only record a subject when they are alone in the frame. This became a strict rule where I would contain them in rooms statically rather than following them around the building. Although this rule is broken once, characters’ paths never cross in the film however, in reality, their rooms are in close proximity, side by side or above on another. This is highly indicative of the place with communal spaces rarely being used or group activities taking place and prompt the question, why are these people living in The Ashleigh Hotel in the first place?

They are essentially choosing to live alone and to be contained, like apartments in a tower block; living alone but doing so together. I wanted to symbolise this through the scene with Linda in the kitchen, buttering and stacking the slices of bread on top of each other. I imagine the residents to be adrift from the world, as if the hotel is a ship out to sea whilst also being isolated from each other, in their separate rooms.



Linda making sandwiches in the kitchen of The Ashleigh Hotel

## INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL

An aim of my research project was to produce a documentary on an internal setting that is symptomatic of a transformation undergone by a seaside town and in this respect, bring the outside world of Blackpool inside of The Ashleigh Hotel. I did this by asking subjects questions about the town's physicality. Linda describes scenes from the beach, "the tide coming in and the waves crashing" as does Mark reminds us of our location, "I've always liked living by the sea [...] I've always been by water, I don't like to be landlocked." Tony references the outside elements by suggesting, "Let's talk about the weather and what it's going to be like tonight." Gideon Koppel uses a similar technique of spoken word in *Sleep Furiously* (2007) to ensure "the wind and rain to be almost omnipresent in the film" to achieve an affinity with the residents of Trefeurig: "the relationship between people and their land reminded me of an expression that I had often heard in this part of Wales – "that people don't own the land, they belong to it" (Koppel, 2007:313).

The second sequence in the *Sleep Furiously* (2007) is of an art class at the village school, the teacher talks to the children about the clay they are learning to mould and invites them to consider its weight and dampness in their hands: "It does quite a lot of things if you keep it in the right consistency... Make it wet." In the next scene of dialogue we see two women describing their difficulty in getting to sleep the night before: "Did you hear the wind last night? It was banging all night." By calling in the viewers' other senses, the sound can provide a roundness to the pro-filmic space.

Mark was the only subject who was able to specifically recall a childhood memory of Blackpool. When interviewing him about this, I specifically asked him: What do you remember of Blackpool as a child? This was done in an attempt to receive an answer that was relatively universal. His answer of "The trams and the lights..." is imagery that is commonly associated with Blackpool, famous for its illuminations. With this in mind, Mark's answers can be seen as not just personal but collective memory and in this respect, shares and represents many child experiences had by those in the outside world.

During the editing process, I started to respond to what I felt were clues in the footage, imagery within scenes that I didn't initially notice when I was filming. I am referencing to the Union Jack bed spread in the first shot of the film and Richard's graphic "ENGLAND" t-shirt worn throughout. These features can be seen to hint to and foreground The Ashleigh Hotel's geographical location and in this way the outside world can be seen to be present in the internal setting. The nationalist iconography identifies and attaches subjects and The Ashleigh Hotel with the land and echoes the significant nationalist political views of Blackpool as a town, as mentioned in the first introduction.



Richard wearing his England T-shirt

## CONCLUSION

At the beginning of this research project, I set out to understand how the film medium could materialise the symbolic change of Blackpool's seaside landscape through the internal location of The Ashleigh Hotel. It became clear that the building functioned differently to typical HMOs in Blackpool and in this way was not reflective of the wider town.

The residents' days were structured by meals provided by owner Valerie Taylor as well as a cleaning service carried out by employee, Linda. The functions of the building still echoed the dynamics of a it's hotel past rather than the profit-driven motivations of an HMO where typically tenants live independently from landlords. Valerie and Nestor Taylor acknowledged that it was this familial and personal dynamic in which they ran the building that would lead to its closure. As they often went to extra lengths to ensure the comfort of residents in terms of expense and time, they struggled to keep costs low and the "business" had been unable to generate profit for years.

Nostalgic childhood memories of the town did not significantly emerge as a theme from interviews as I had expected. Residents generally settled in the town and in The Ashleigh Hotel as they had nowhere else to go after becoming homeless. Blackpool provided residents with a hopeful opportunity to find a place to live and start again rather than returning to relive past family narratives. The perceived characteristics of the sea and coast were initial motivating factors for the residents to settle there however, it became clear that residents weren't highly engaged with the external world and instead were more contained and affected by The Ashleigh Hotel itself. With this in mind, it was difficult to differentiate whether it was the appeal of the town's landscape or the privacy and provision of care that could be gained at The Ashleigh Hotel that provided residents with a sense of comfort and escapism.

A sense of childhood memories were evoked in the research project however, these were generally detached from Blackpool. This reminded me of my first meeting with Simon Blackburn from Blackpool Council, who gave a detailed introduction into the town's history. As first mentioned in my introduction, the meeting generated a substantial feeling of sentimentality for Blackpool despite having no real connection into the town. In this way, I realised that Blackpool seemed to symbolise the fond childhood memory without childhood experiences having necessarily taken place there. My interest in materialising the past and nostalgia was the main provocation for the research, through my experience of being in The Ashleigh Hotel and filming its domestic interior I believe another interest in time has emerged. Through the visual integrity of the framing and generating a sense of the residents being adrift from each other in the space, I believe a strong feeling of timelessness is present in the film which is an interesting and surprising development from my initial intention for the research project.

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